Policing During the Time of Corona: The Indian Context

Debajyoti Biswas[*] and Parvin Sultana[**]

Abstract   According to Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, India has the most stringent lockdown as compared to other nations and has scored 100% in the scale; nevertheless, there had been sporadic incidence of attacks on police personnel and medical workers in different parts of India. This article argues that such resistance comes from two broad factors: (i) a collective scepticism that has built up among certain section of people and (ii) a tool of defiance against the government. In order to quell such resistance, community leaders and the police can play a very crucial role. In order to establish the above hypotheses, a quantitative approach of the events that have occurred in India during the lockdown period of 21 days shall be considered.

Introduction

According to *Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker*, India has the most stringent lockdown as compared to other nations and has scored 100% in the scale.[1,2] Despite enforcing such stringent, lockdown from the midnight of 24 March to 14 April 2020 (a period of 21 days), there have been sporadic incidence of attacks on police personnel and medical workers in different parts of India. It is indeed a matter of concern as to why certain groups of people are opposing the lockdown while the entire nation is undergoing a threat from the deadly virus? This article argues that such resistance does not necessarily follow from ignorance always but from two other broad factors: (i) a collective scepticism that has built up among certain section of people and (ii) and a tool of defiance against the government. This article further underscores that in order to quell such resistance, community leaders can play a leading role in spreading awareness among the masses and the police can initiate trust-building measures as well. In order to establish the above hypotheses, this article shall use the theoretical framework advanced by Stephen Reicher and Clifford Stott in a paper titled 'Policing the Coronavirus Outbreak: Processes and Prospects for Collective Disorder'. This article shall consider the sporadic events that have

[*] Department of English, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, India. E-mail: deb61594@gmail.com

[**] Department of Political Science, Pramathesh Barua College, Gauhati University, Assam, India

[1] https://covidtracker.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about-api. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[2] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-implements-strictest-lockdown-in-the-world-lags-in-testing-expert-1665604-2020-04-10. (accessed 14 April 2020).

occurred in India during the lockdown period of 21 days as the data for this study.

Prelude

Reicher and Scott stated that riots start between 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' when the former develops 'a sense of illegitimacy and grievance'. In the Indian context, this feeling had been brewing among some people for quite some time and the last straw had been the enactment of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the announcement of a decision to update the National Population Register and National Register of Citizens nationwide. Since then protests in different parts of India have rocked the nation, at times turning violent and inviting strict police crackdown at places where law and order went out of control.[3,4]

The protests turned violent in Delhi on 2 March 2020 during the American President Mr Trump's visit to India.[5,6,7] Furthermore, when the riots in Delhi turned communal (Hindu versus Muslims), many people alleged that the police acted hand in gloves with the government.[8] Many videos started doing rounds on social media allegedly showing police officials acting as bystanders while the city burned. Under such circumstances when notification about social distancing and prohibition of public gathering were passed, the protest groups took it as government's stratagem to extenuate the intensity of the protest. This resulted in viewing the entire government machinery including medical workers and police as 'them' and the 'outgroup'. However, the protest sites were eventually evacuated as possibility of large-scale contamination loomed large.[9] Apart from the anti-CAA protestors, these views were also shared by large section of Indian population, mainly daily wage earners and labourers who could not anticipate the lockdown and felt that they were not given enough time to prepare for a complete lockdown and were left stranded in metros without any safety net. As desperate time needs desperate measures, the migrant workers were the hardest hit.[10,11] They also perceived the state machinery and police as agents of the upper class who are better placed to afford such breaks from work.

Act resulting from ignorance, helplessness, defiance, and scepticism

As the number of COVID19 positive cases steadily rose all across, the Indian government started taking a number of precautionary steps from mid-March. Regular classes were suspended in schools

3   https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/india-footage-appears-show-police-attack-jamia-students-200216053500418. html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

4   https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/law-and-order/jamia-violence-republic-tv-investigation-exposes-conspiracy. html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

5   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/delhi-rocked-by-deadly-protests-during-donald-trumps-india-visit. (accessed 14 April 2020).

6   https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/worst-communal-violence-in-delhi-in-decades-leaves-13-dead-as-trump-visits-india/2020/02/25/ecac4b5e-57dd-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html. (accessed 13 April 2020)

7 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/world/asia/new-delhi-hindu-muslim-violence.html.(accessed 13 April 2020)

8   https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/toll-rises-to-22-in-delhi-violence-as-modi-issues-plea-for-calm/2020/02/26/ 2cb8e0d8-589f-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

9   https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/delhi-lockdown-coronavirus-shaheen-bagh-protest-cleared-1658927-2020-03-24. (accessed 15 April 2020)

10   https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/scary-poor-hit-hardest-india-coronavirus-lockdown-200409105651819.html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

11   https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/modi-seeks-forgiveness-india-poor-covid-19-lockdown-200329132107033. html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

and colleges.[12] Different states also started taking steps to enforce social distancing. The central government invoked the Disaster Management Act and the Epidemic Disease Act of 1897 to tackle the crisis arising out of the coronavirus outbreak across India, and from 24 March, the entire country has been undergoing complete lockdown.[13,14] Nevertheless, there have been blatant violations of the advisories issued by the central and state governments in India. A close scrutiny reveals that these violations are perpetrated by four kinds of people: there are many who are still ignorant about the seriousness of the situation and their own vulnerability and therefore taking the lockdown in a casual manner. Some even ventured out into the streets to see what people are doing; some went out in search of smoke and drink or food items (ignorance).[15] The migrant workers and daily wage-earners stuck outside their home-state are left penniless with no income and ration. Some of them have walked for miles braving hunger and fatigue for days to reach home (the helpless)[16,17]; then there are the ones who use political and administrative connections, money, and muscle power to violate the lockdown (defiance)[18,19,20]; and the ones who are sceptical about it because of their doubt in the ruling party (scepticism).[21,22,23]

Incidents

This is perhaps for the first time that the entire Indian population has experienced a complete lockdown situation for the first time in their lifetime. The Prime Minister declared a Janata Curfew to be observed on 22 March, whereby people were asked to stay at home for the entire day and at seven in the evening, the Prime Minister appealed to the people to step on their balconies and clap to show appreciation for the doctors, nurses, and all other health workers working at the forefront. While the entire day went on well, there were instances where people came out on streets in large groups and defying all the norms of social distancing, creating a chaotic situation.[24]

On 23 March evening, the Prime Minister declared that the entire country will be under a

[12] https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/coronavirus-cases-in-india-reach-74-delhi-govt-announces-shutting-down-of-schools-colleges-cinema-halls-120031201514_1.html. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[13] https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/centre-invokes-epidemic-act-and-disaster-management-act-to-prevent-spread-of-coronavirus/article31049161.ece. (accessed 13 April 2020).

[14] https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/modi-govt-is-using-two-laws-to-tackle-coronavirus-spread-but-one-of-them-needs-changes/386052/. (accessed 13 April 2020)

[15] https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/shops-forced-to-close-on-first-day-of-lockdown/article31146256.ece. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[16] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers/2020/03/27/a62df166-6f7d-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[17] https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/coronavirus-with-no-money-or-food-labourers-walk-miles-to-reach-home-towns-in-the-hope-of-survival-1660578-2020-03-28. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[18] https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/case-against-bjp-mla-dadarao-keche-for-violating-lockdown-norms/article31273875.ece.(accessed 14 April 2020).

[19] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/karnataka-bjp-mla-celebrates-birthday-with-villagers-amid-lockdown-1665750-2020-04-11. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[20] https://news.abplive.com/news/india/maharashtra-case-against-dhfls-wadhawans-for-violating-lockdown-bjp-leaders-hit-out-at-state-govt-1194466. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[21] https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/mar/27/muslim-cleric-27-others-booked-for-defying-covid-19-lockdown-in-bhopal-2122196.html. (accessed 14 April 2020).

[22] https://www.news18.com/photogallery/india/despite-coronavirus-warnings-hundreds-gather-for-friday-mass-prayers-in-india-2544901-5.html. (accessed 13 April 2020).

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snMl0XcSzOU. (accessed 13 April 2020).

[24] https://ahmedabadmirror.indiatimes.com/ahmedabad/cover-story/social-distancing-turns-antisocial/articleshow/74764838.cms. (accessed 13 April 2020)

lockdown for 21 days. From the experience of European countries as well as China, South Korea, it became clear that social distancing is one of the effective ways to contain the spread of this infection. However, once the lockdown was put in place, there were many instances where the lockdown has been violated. Spurts of violent events also took place where police personnel, health workers, and even common wage labourers were at the receiving end. A look at few incidents will throw some light on the trend that such violence and violation took.

In Punjab, some members from the Nihang community (a sect in the Sikh religion) have perpetrated the worst brutality on the police when they were stopped during a police checking. The Nihangs not only attacked the unarmed police with swords but also severed the hand of one of the police officers.[25] In many places, health workers, doctors have been targeted despite the fact that they are at the forefront of the fight against this virus.[26,27] There were incidents reported whereby patients under quarantine made vulgar signals at the nurses.[28] In fact, a video went viral, which shows people throwing stones at two doctors who went to a place in Indore to do contact tracing of a Covid-19 positive patient.[29] But the perpetrators have not been only citizens in all cases. In an incident, two All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi (AIIMS)doctors returning from emergency were beaten up by the patrolling police. Even when they showed their identity cards, it did not end and one of the doctors was left with a broken arm.[30]

As mentioned above, one of the earliest violations of the lockdown came from the most vulnerable section of the people – the daily wage earners. Metro cities are home to a large number of migrant workers coming from different parts of the country. Most live on their day to day earnings. Construction site workers often stay at those sites and do not have a separate space to live at. Left with no work and no support, thousands of migrant workers thronged the Delhi streets a day after the lockdown to go to their native places. As there were no buses, many workers started thousands of kilometres long journey on foot. It was only later that respective state governments arranged for buses for these migrants. However, migrants were later asked to stay where they are. But not even a week later, violence broke out in Surat, Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Around 500 migrant workers clashed with police when they demanded to be sent back to their respective home states as they ran out of money and food. In retaliation, the police fired tear gas shells at those migrant workers.[31]

A large number of First Information Reports (FIRs) have been filed against the violators of the lockdown both under Disasters Management Act and the Epidemic Diseases Act.[32] While the administration is trying to work on different fronts, sporadic incidents of lockdown violations continued. In some states, violators were slapped with

[25]   https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/policeman-s-hand-chopped-off-two-others-injured-in-attack-by-nihangis-in-pun-1666075-2020-04-12. (accessed 13 April 2020)

[26] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52151141. (accessed 14 April 2020)

[27]   https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-13/doctors-come-under-attack-in-india-as-coronavirus-stigma-grows. (accessed 14 April 2020)

[28]   https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/tablighi-jamaat-attendees-quarantined-in-ghaziabad-hospital-make-vulgar-signs-roam-nude-inside-820762.html. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[29] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52151141. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[30]   https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/aiims-doctors-beaten-up-by-policemen-in-bhopal/article31303279.ece. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[31] https://in.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southasia/indian-police-fire-tear-gas-at-jobless-workers-defying-coronavirus-lockdown-idINKBN21H0OR. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[32]   https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/modi-govt-is-using-two-laws-to-tackle-coronavirus-spread-but-one-of-them-needs-changes/386052/. (accessed 12 April 2020)

National Security Act.[33] In Uttar Pradesh, this act was slapped on people who attacked police personnel.[34] However, similar mechanisms have not been followed across all the states.[35]

All these incidents show that there are sections of people who are not cooperating with the government in order to make the lockdown effective and fruitful. The actual objective of the lockdown is to contain the spread of the virus; however, with the movement of people from one place to another, this objective may well be defeated. There are some states in India where the lockdown had been effective because of the proper coordination of the administration, the police, the community and religious leaders, social organizations, and the people. One such state is Kerala. It has the highest recovery rate and only two deaths; this state may be taken as a model in understanding the effective manner of making the lockdown successful and minimizing the spread of the virus.

Role of community/religious leaders

In the initial days of lockdown, there were cases from certain groups with religious affiliation flouting the laws. The Delhi State Government issued an order on 12 March 2020 to restrict gatherings which saw a conglomeration of more than 200 people. However, on 14 March, the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha leader, Swami Chakrapani organized a 'Cow Urine Party' (*gau mutra*) at their headquarters in Delhi.[36] It saw the participation of more than 200 people. The Tablighi Jamaat also continued receiving participants from Covid-19 affected countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, etc. during this period. While the Markaz headquarters are just next door to the Nizamuddin police outpost, it was only towards the end of March that the building was evacuated.[37]

The Markaz headquarters eventually turned out to be a hotspot and accelerated the number of corona-affected cases in India. However, religious and community leaders in some cases have played an important role in taking the government's message to the community. The largest religious minority in India—the Muslims have been sceptical of the government in power owing to its alleged majoritarian overtones. In such a scenario, conspiracy theories and fake messages started doing rounds which further alienated the community in the fight where all should have stood united. However, community leaders have been taken on board to a great extent. Many from the community condemned the irresponsible behaviour of the Tablighi Jamaatis and have requested Muslims to follow lockdown rules and celebrate religious functions like *Shab e Barat* which again includes community prayers in their homes. The chief of the All India Imams Organisation, Imam Ahmad Ilyasi has issued an appeal in this regard.[38]

Religious leaders in the state of Kerala played an exemplary role. The Guruvayur temple authorities asked devotees to not visit the temple, marriages were postponed, and thermal scanning was

[33] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nsa-to-be-slapped-against-persons-who-attack-police men-enforcing-coronavirus-lockdown-in-up/articleshow/74962374.cms?from=mdr. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[34] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/lockdown-violation-568-arrested-rs-13-lakh-collected-as-fine-in-up/articleshow/75096088.cms. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[35] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nsa-to-be-slapped-against-persons-who-attack-police men-enforcing-coronavirus-lockdown-in-up/articleshow/74962374.cms?from=mdr. (accessed 14 April 2020)

[36] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-group-hosts-cow-urine-party-says-covid-19-due-to-meat-eaters/ article31070516.ece. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[37] https://scroll.in/article/957891/tablighi-jamaat-how-did-the-government-fail-to-detect-a-coronavirus-infection-hotspot. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[38] https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-in-the-time-of-corona-responsibilities-of-religious-leaders-go-be yond-just-asking-people-not-to-congregate/350580. (accessed 12 April 2020)

installed for those who came.[39] Even traditional religious rituals were changed to ensure contamination is contained. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan met a number of religious leaders and requested them to cancel religious gatherings. The imams, pastors, and priests readily agreed.[40] Kerala has set an example of communal harmony by defeating parochial and petty politics during this hour of crisis when the Right wing and the Left wing forces joined hands to serve the people and fight against the virus.[41] The appeal made by the religious heads to their community to maintain social distancing in Kerala and other parts of India has considerably helped in minimizing the violation related to lockdowns. The appeals made by the Minority Affairs Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi,[42] Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind's General Secretary, Maulana Mahmood Madani,[43] All India Imams Organisation's chief Umer Ahmad Ilyasi,[44] Civil servants belonging to the minority community,[45] and political leaders from the Muslim community[46] have helped in

bringing some order and stability among the minorities in India, although some sporadic attacks on health workers continue in minority dominated areas because of the involvement of some fringe elements.[47] Research has shown that the religious leaders have always played a major role in building confidence and maintaining a healthy lifestyle among adherents (Anshel and Smith, 2013; Heward-Mills *et al.*, 2018).

Apart from the role played by the religious leaders, the role of the police has also helped in trust-building measures among the people in India. Taking cue from the police of other countries, the police in some of the states like West Bengal, Maharashtra, Assam, Nagaland, and Goa sang some of the famous Bollywood songs to keep the public in good humour.[48,49,50] The cops also tried to sensitize the people about social distancing and sanitization measures apart from distributing food among the needy ones at various cities across India.[51,52,53] Such efforts have helped in overcoming the myth about police brutalities. As

[39] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/no-devotees-will-be-allowed-into-sabarimala-temple-for-10-day-annual-fest-from-march-29-officials/articleshow/74735053.cms?from=mdr. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[40] https://www.livemint.com/news/india/how-science-guides-religion-in-corona-hit-kerala-11584628381619.html. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[41] https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/coronavirus-pandemic-brings-sworn-enemies-together-in-north-kerala/story-8ZgsN36D1wplP65KZosGEK.html. (accessed 12 April 2020)

[42] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/naqvi-appeals-to-muslims-to-adhere-to-lockdown-social-distancing-guidelines-during-ramzan/articleshow/75119549.cms?from=mdr. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[43] https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-ensure-social-distancing-maintained-during-coming-festivals-centre-to-states-2207921. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[44] https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-in-the-time-of-corona-responsibilities-of-religious-leaders-go-beyond-just-asking-people-not-to-congregate/350580. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[45] https://theprint.in/india/muslim-ias-ips-officers-covid-19-appeal-to-community-dont-give-anyone-reason-to-blame-you/395665/. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[46] https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/offer-prayers-from-home-owaisi-appeals-to-muslims/article31181441.ece. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[47] https://www.news18.com/news/india/moradabad-locals-pelt-stones-on-health-workers-nsa-slapped-on-culprits-2578793.html. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[48] https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/covid-lockdown-shows-indian-police-isnt-all-brutal-some-officers-can-sing-for-us-feed-poor/399845/. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[49] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/kolkata-police-give-a-hit-bengali-song-a-timely-makeover/article31250921.ece. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[50] https://telanganatoday.com/watch-hyderabad-cop-sings-to-keep-people-indoors-during-lockdown. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[51] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-in-india-lucknow-police-distributes-ration-food-to-poor-amid-lockdown-1660569-2020-03-28. (accessed 15 April 2020)

mentioned earlier the police had also been alert about the fake messages that try to destabilize communal harmony, and irrespective of the religious of political affiliation of the perpetrators, the police have nabbed the culprits.[54,55,56] Research has shown that such 'distributive fairness' always strengthens the relationship between public and police (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). Since the police are enforcing the government orders, an overall balancing of the relationship among the people, the police, and the government is also very crucial. In achieving that balance, the police have to negotiate between the normative and the pragmatic (Suchman, 1995). As a result, such measures can eventually lead to the active participation of the people in helping the police to maintain public order and stop violation of the government advisories (Jackson and Bradford 2010). The role of police can therefore not only create awareness among the citizens and build trust in the government agency, but can also indirectly make the citizens more socially responsible and sensitized towards crimes.

Conclusion

The violation of the lockdown during the initial days has considerably reduced. The people have become more sensitized and better organized than before. The community leaders too understood their responsibilities and therefore have appealed to their people to follow government advisories. The role played by the police also helped in winning the trust of the common people, thereby bringing down the escalation between the communal forces. Apart from the strong role played by the community leaders and police, the role of the government is also important during such epidemic. The stringent measures taken by the Chief Minister of Kerala by issuing strict advisories and warnings against violators have certainly helped in having an effective lockdown.[57,58] Apart from strict lockdown measures, Kerala government has also been doing 'aggressive testing and contact tracing' as reported by *The Washington Post*.[59] The Huffington Post has reported about the 15 effective ways in which Kerala is handling the fight against COVID19[60]: 'Contact tracing, Route Map, Quarantine Comfort, Focus on Mental Health, Visit from Government Officials, Daily Press Conferences, Increasing Internet Connectivity, Sanitiser Production, App to Combat Fake News, Midday Meal Delivery, Checking Rail and Road Entry Points, Awareness Among Migrant Workers, Break the Chain Initiative, Enlisting Volunteers for Help, and Batting and Prepping for Foreign Travels'. With all these measures, Kerala

[52] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/assam-police-local-businessman-distribute-food-items-among-labourers-affected-by-lockdown-1660988-2020-03-29. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[53] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thane/kalyan-police-distribute-food-to-needy-amid-covid-19-lockdown/articleshow/75017183.cms. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[54] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-fake-news-assam-police-1665132-2020-04-09. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[55] https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/covid-19-maharashtra-cyber-police-arrest-11-people-for-spreading-fake-news-85-firs-registered-120040600314_1.html. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[56] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/punjab-police-register-34-cases-arrest-four-persons-for-spreading-fake-news/articleshow/75015587.cms. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[57] https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/covid-19-kerala-observes-janata-curfew-cm-warns-violators-of-guidelines/article31134444.ece. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[58] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/covid-19-with-14-new-cases-kerala-tally-rises-to-105-cm-warns-against-overpricing-and-hoarding/articleshow/74800410.cms. (accessed 15 April 2020)

[59] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/aggressive-testing-contact-tracing-cooked-meals-how-the-indian-state-of-kerala-flattened-its-coronavirus-curve/2020/04/10/3352e470-783e-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html. (accessed 14 April 2020)

[60] https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/coronavirus-kerala-government-strategy_in_5e6e47c7c5b6747ef11efc4f. (accessed 14 April 2020).

stands a good chance of containing the spread of the virus within the state. With proper coordination among the people, the police, the leaders, and the government, the fight against coronavirus has become effective. These lockdowns certainly have various socio-political and economic ramifications, but 'with careful management both at a general policy level and in terms of sensitive community-based and dialogue led policing, it will be possible to maintain a sense of common endeavour and hence to draw on the community as a key resource in dealing with the crisis' (Reicher and Stott, 2020) and the difference between 'us' and 'them' will also gradually diminish.

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